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From: CN=Jeff Frithsen/OU=DC/O=USEPA/C=US
Sent: Tue 3/22/2011 1:38:44 PM
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News Headline: Battle Over Alaska Mining Project Heads to Washington |

Outlet Full Name: New York Times - Online, The

News OCR Text: A large mining project proposed for southwest Alaska has sparked a lobbying battle between some area residents who say it would help the region's economy and others who fear environmental degradation to nearby Bristol Bay and its major salmon run.

The Pebble Project, located about 200 miles southwest of Anchorage, is believed to contain large quantities of gold, copper and molybdenum, an element used as an alloying agent in cast iron and steel.

The Pebble Partnership, an alliance between London-based Anglo American and Vancouver-based Northern Dynasty Minerals Ltd., is still in the advanced exploration phase for the mine and no permit applications have yet been submitted.

This week representatives from Alaska Native Corporations were in Washington meeting with Obama administration officials and lawmakers, urging them to give full consideration to the project when an application is filed. They are trying to counter efforts from environmentalists who want to kill the mine. Project opponents will be in Washington later this month for lobbying of their own.

"We believe in due process," said Trefon Angasan, chairman of Alaska Peninsula Corp., which includes several villages in the state. He's also a consultant for the Pebble Partnership on regional and Native issues.

Angasan and others were alarmed when U.S. EPA decided to conduct a scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed at the urging of several tribes and area fishermen.

"The Bristol Bay watershed is essential to the health, environment and economy of Alaska," EPA Region 10 Administrator Dennis McLerran said in a statement. "Gathering data and getting public input now, before development occurs, just makes sense. Doing this we can be assured that our future decisions are grounded in the best science and information and in touch with the needs of these communities."

EPA says its study is looking at the broader issue of large-scale development in the area and that it hasn't yet come to a regulatory decision. But environmentalists and mine opponents hope the agency will halt work on the Pebble mine.

"This particular deposit is at the headwater of Alaska's if not the world's largest salmon run," said Natural Resources Defense Council attorney Taryn Kiekow. "The salmon is the gold up there."

Opponents say the project has sparked widespread local concern, making allies of environmentalists and fishermen concerned about commercial and subsistence fishing. But supporters are working to debunk that assertion.

"The opposition is saying that all of the people in Bristol Bay are opposed to it. I am here to tell you that's not true," Angasan said during his trip to Washington. "Yeah we need to save the fish, but we also need to save our people. And I'm not here to tell you we are going to swap fish for the mine. We need to look at the opportunity to develop the mine without impacting the environment."

The Pebble Partnership says the mine will create 2,000 jobs during construction and 1,000 jobs lasting several decades, and will generate significant tax revenue.

"This project is important to the region to diversity economics," said Abe Williams, President of Nuna Resources Inc., a group that advocates for sustainable development and more job opportunities. "We have seen a very large out-migration of our community members over a period of years. And it's had a dramatic effect on our communities. They've shut down some schools; we've lost students."

Angasan said some area residents are already reaping benefits by assisting with water sampling for the project. He worries EPA action will not only stop the mine, but also development on 10,000 acres of Alaska Peninsula Corp. property next to the Pebble Project.

"We would consider it a 'taking' if regulations are thrown at Pebble and affect us as a landowner in the area," Angasan said. "We know then that whatever they invoke in the Bristol Bay watershed would stymie whatever benefits we would have received through our own land ownership into the future."

Angasan and others lobbying with him this week said the company should at least be allowed to submit its application and go through the legal process.

Project opponents soon headed to D.C. are skeptical of those claims of impartiality.

"Their neutrality is very pro-Pebble," said Kim Williams, executive director of Nunamata Aulukestai, which aims to protect Bristol Bay. The group's name is Yup'ik for "caretakers of the land."

Opponents say the area, crisscrossed with rivers and lakes, is environmentally sensitive. Alaska is generally a pro-mining state, they say, but this case is so different that it has attracted unlikely opponents. They say the tourism and fishing economy would take a hit.

"It's so massive," Williams said. "That is part of the problem. It is so huge and you have to destroy so much earth."

But Raymond Wassillie, Newhalen Tribal Council President, wants area residents and government officials to give the project a chance for the sake of his people.

"I like employment," Wassillie said. "Employment makes a happy village."